

AN EPISODE IN AUGUST

Carla Stoneberg

Now that all these years have passed, I believe I might at last be able to share this story. It is hard to do, however, because long ago on a sandy beach Mary Beth and I swore to each other, in the true-to-the-death comradeship of twelve-year-old girls, that we would never, never, never reveal to anyone what happened out there on the lake that August afternoon. Please forgive me, Mary Beth, but the conspiracy of silence is over. I am about to tell all.

It happened on a warm, sun-soaked Friday afternoon at a youth resort camp by one of Minnesota's ten thousand lakes. In obedience to the demands of the heat and humidity of those summer dog days, the campers were all resting in their cabins and would remain there until mid-afternoon, when the beach officially opened. But for Mary Beth and for me, the start of the camp's siesta signaled the moment for us to begin our illicit adventure. For several days we had been practicing our free style stroke in the lake, building up strength for this very day—the day when we would each attempt to swim across the entire distance of that beckoning body of water.

I would swim across first while Mary Beth rowed along beside me in a boat. Mary Beth, then, would swim back while I manned the oars. The lifeguard had warned us not to try this. He had estimated the distance to be over a mile. We would be committing an inexcusable violation of camp rules. But in true preadolescent rebellion, we were determined to try.

Silently we escaped from our cabin and slipped down to the deserted beach with its gleaming, empty lifeguard's tower. We were heady with excitement. As we shoved the boat into the water, however, I did have one fleeting moment of unease. For some reason, I remembered a little thing my pigtailed friend had done at the start of our week together at the camp. Mary Beth had thrown away the orange and white capsules she had brought with her from home. "I know I don't really need these," she had said with smug satisfaction as she dumped them into the weeds behind the cabin. I had wondered at this; but I had said nothing, thus becoming a self-indicated co-conspirator.

"C'mon!" Mary Beth called, bringing my thoughts back to the adventure at hand. "Your turn first!"

I actually made it safely across that lake. At the far shore I climbed into the boat, and Mary Beth turned it around. Then she kicked off her sandals and dived in to begin her own conquest of the water. I remember admiring her strong, confident strokes as she started out.

Twenty minutes later Mary Beth was swimming easily across the deepest part of the lake. Rowing slowly beside her, I saw how the moving oars dribbled drops of water onto the surface of the glassy lake, making arcs of ripples. I saw how they radiated out to touch my smoothly gliding friend. She would make it, too; I just knew she would! Then how we would celebrate! What fun we would have telling the kids . . .

Roused from my reverie, I saw a sudden, frantic paleness spreading over the face of the swimmer. Not understanding, I still instinctively dropped the oars and reached out for Mary Beth's extended, wet hand. We made contact a split second before her body went rigid and still in the water.

"Mary Beth!" I screamed, pulling her toward me. Blessed adrenalin (though then I did not know its name) surged through my entire musculature and gave me the strength I needed to pull her wildly jerking body to the edge of the boat. It was all I could do to keep her head just barely above water as her eyes disappeared somewhere under her upper lids. Horrified, I prayed fervently that she would please, God, oh *please*, start breathing again. My own heart stopped beating, it seemed, until she did. An absolute age, an unimaginable eon of time, passed as I held her head pressed there against the outside of the boat. What if she slipped from my grasp? When I could again think coherently, I slowly edged her now-limp body around to the straight back end of the boat. Somehow I managed to pull her up, over the end, and in. Shaking uncontrollably, I knelt over her inert form as it lay in the bottom of the gently rocking boat. But each time I saw her chest rise and fall, I shot volleys of gratitude heavenward. She was alive!

After a while Mary Beth's respirations became regular and even. Presently she opened her eyes and moaned. After many long minutes she moved her lips and asked softly, "What happened?"

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One morning years later when I was a budding nursing student, I began preparing medications at a community hospital. I opened a

bottle of pills and suddenly saw again those same orange and white capsules. My knees went weak in remembering, and I had to sit down. But this time I knew. In my hand I held Dilantin, a powerful drug which was still, after all those years, one of the biggest guns in the ever-expanding artillery against epilepsy.

SILENCE OF TIME

Anonymous

silence of time
 passing by.
days filled with no more
 than blueberry pancakes
 and trips to the beach.
no decisions to make
no intense thought;
 only the rush of the surf
 against sunburnt arms
 and fleeting images
 of sand castles melting
 against the shore.
emerge
 refreshed.
the sun reaching into
 the soul
 dispersing the greyish tinge
 of yesterday mornings.
return home
 along with shadows of dusk
 content to know
the sun can
 still make you smile.